

LEEDS LGBT+ MAPPING PROJECT

Consultation with LGBT+ people with learning disabilities

29th November 2017

Background

Through the community research and community development work undertaken by the Leeds LGBT+ Mapping Project we have found that there is a big gap in provision and support for LGBT+ people with learning disabilities. Over the last year a number of professionals working in the supporting people with learning disabilities have engaged with us to highlight this need, and to find out if there is any support they can signpost or support clients to access.

The Leeds LGBT+ Mapping Project and TenFold invited LGBT+ people with a learning disability and professionals in working in the learning disability sector to discuss their experiences, barriers and what it means to be supported to explore their sexuality and gender identity.

This meeting was attended by four people with learning disabilities who identify as LGBT+ and five professionals who have direct experience of supporting LGBT+ clients with learning disabilities and discussion was facilitated by Leeds LGBT+ Mapping Project worker and volunteers. Discussion was themed around four topics; coming out, education about sex and relationships, getting support, and connectedness with other LGBT+ people. It is possible that more people with learning disabilities may have wanted to attend, but were unable to find the support to do so - the support workers who were in attendance were particularly encouraging of the people they were working with.

Key themes from discussion

What prevents people with learning disabilities from exploring their gender and sexuality

- **Fear of not being taken seriously because of having a learning disability**
 - One participant said that for some people with a learning disability they fear disclosing that they are LGBT+ to people for fear they won't be taken seriously, because of their learning disability.

- **Ability to communicate** - There was some discussion about people with learning disabilities who were less able to express or communicate their thoughts on their sexuality or gender identity and how there was little opportunity for them in exploring these aspects of themselves
- **Fear of a negative response** - Some participants said that they had not told people about their sexuality because they have feared a negative response, including family and support staff. One participant said they did not tell their support worker because he was nervous “she might be cross”. Another participant didn’t think they would be able to tell their mother about their sexuality or gender identity because they would be disowned, they had disclosed their feelings to a previous partner who was then sexually abusively to them.
- **Inability to explore sexuality or gender at home** - People with learning disabilities are sometimes prevented from exploring how they feel at home, either due to their parents’ or carers’ prejudices around LGBT+ identities or their concerns for their safety in intimate relationships. Some people fear being admonished by their parents for experimenting with makeup or cross dressing. One participant - who manages respite service - told us that some of their clients with learning disabilities who come to their service are unsure about their sexuality and or gender but are unable to talk to their parents about this - when they come to respite they often take the opportunity to explore these parts of themselves. Participants talked about supporting service users to experiment with their gender presentation at respite by wearing makeup, and going to drama groups. Some participants commented that they thought that some parents would allow their children with learning disabilities to have heterosexual relationships not but same sex relationships.
- **Protective parents** - Some people with learning disabilities are unable to speak to their parents about their sexuality or gender, or explore these parts of themselves because their parents are ‘overprotective’ and anxious about them developing intimate relationships. One participant said “sometimes parents wrap them in cotton wool, and I think it’s wrong”
- **Not knowing about LGBT+ identities** - The lack of exposure to information about LGBT+ identities means that some people with learning disabilities are unable to understand their own feelings around their sexuality or gender. One participant in their late 40s with learning disabilities shared that he had only recently been able to identify as bisexual - he had been confused about ‘weird feelings’ he had for men - when he spoke to a friend (who didn’t have a learning disability) that friend explained what ‘bisexual’ was.

What helps people with learning disabilities explore their sexuality and gender identity

- **Positive responses to 'coming out'** - There were some positive stories from participants with learning disabilities 'coming out' about their sexuality. One participant said his grandad is a good support to him and that there's always an open invitation from his grandad to talk about anything, another participant said his parents are also supportive of his sexuality. One male participant with learning disabilities shared that he recently came out as bisexual out to his friends, brother and co-workers and that most people's behaviour towards him didn't change and it felt like "weight of my shoulders". He said that one friend who is homophobic and right wing made some jokes about his sexuality initially, but has since changed his attitude.
- **The gender of the support worker** - For two of the participants with learning disabilities, the gender of the support worker was an enabling factor when it came to talking about LGBT+ issues. For one male participant with learning disabilities having a male support worker was important for him in being able to talk about his sexuality. For another participant having a female support worker was a factor that allowed them to be open about their sexuality and gender identity.
- **Supportive workers** - Some of the people with learning disabilities at the meeting were able to attend because of the practical and emotional support of their social worker/support worker. Supportive workers at the meeting were alongside their clients in an open and non-judgemental way, and were able to build confidence in LGBT+ people with learning disabilities to participate in discussion about their sexuality and gender identity.

Learning about sex and relationships

- **Few opportunities to learn about sex and relationships** - The group discussed the lack of RSE education in schools for people with a learning disability. One participant said he had some lessons in a mainstream school on sex and relationships that included same sex relationships. Another participant spoke about how if he had been taught about sex in school then he thinks he would not have been a parent at 18 - "they don't think people with learning disabilities have relationships".
- **Having safe intimate relationships** - Participants wanted to be supported to have intimate relationships safely. There was some discussion about the pressures to have sex in relationships. One participant spoke about having previously been in abusive relationships.

- **Learning about sexuality through the internet and media** - three of the participants with a learning disability said that they had in part learned about their sexuality through seeing pictures on the internet - some of LGBT+ people having sex, some of naked people. One of the participants said he had sought out these pictures. One participant spoke of unwanted sexualised communication on the internet - people he knew sending unsolicited pictures of their genitals on social media. There was also discussion about the rising visibility of LGBT+ people in the media, particularly on TV and that this was a point of learning for people.

Getting support

- **Barriers to getting support around gender identity** - There was some discussion of people with learning disabilities who have expressed that they are transgender being unable to access gender identity services. One participant expressed that they were 'trapped in the wrong body', however because of their learning disability and their personality disorder diagnosis they must have a period of 12 months without having an 'episode' and needing support around their mental health before they can access Gender Identity Services. Their social worker felt this was unrealistic and being denied access to support around their gender negatively impacts their mental health. Other participants spoke about co-workers who have had clients with learning disabilities who have also been unable to get support around their gender.
- **Tendency to medicate rather than offer talking therapies** - there was some discussion about what some people saw as a tendency to prescribe drugs for people with learning disabilities' mental health rather than talking therapies - "it's too easy to give out medication instead of counseling".
- **Being supported in a group setting** - Participants' expressed that they felt supported in the consultation and that they would like the opportunity to have more meetings with other LGBT+ people where they can be supported to attend by a support worker/social worker.

Meeting and being friends with other LGBT people

- **Importance of having LGBT+ friends** - Participants expressed that they would like to have friends who are LGBT+, for some it was important that these friends were of the same gender. People wanted to have friends and relationships with people who shared similar experiences around their sexuality

or gender identity, and that these people did not need to have learning disabilities.

- **Being supported to access Leeds' LGBT+ scene** - Participants expressed that they would like to be supported to go to LGBT+ spaces in Leeds. Only one participant with a learning disability had visited a gay bar.

Recommendations

- For services who support people with learning disabilities to review how their services support LGBT+ clients
- Reviewing and addressing the training needs of services and support workers. Ensuring that staff have understanding of LGBT+ identities and challenges, and are able to effectively support LGBT+ people with learning disabilities
- Developing effective monitoring of for sexuality and gender identity of people with learning disabilities in services
- For services who support people with learning disabilities to ensure they communicate an LGBT+ inclusive environment- for example by having LGBT+ inclusive posters
- Developing spaces and opportunities for people with learning disabilities who are LGBT+ or unsure about their sexual orientation or gender identity to meet other LGBT+ people - through dating sites, social groups, club nights etc.
- Education for people with learning disabilities around LGBT+ identities and safer sex
- Investigation into the barriers and pathways for people with learning disabilities in accessing support around their gender identity
- Further research on the experience and support needs of LGBT+ people with learning disabilities in Leeds